

THE VEDANTIC ELEMENTS IN THE WORKS OF R. K. NARAYAN:

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper intends to analyze the novels of R.K. Narayan with the intention of testifying propositions of Vedanta philosophy in the scripts. The first reading of R.K. Narayan's novels may not reveal any Vedantic view on the part of the author. But when we read the novels carefully, a hidden meaning is revealed; a silent stream of Vedanta philosophy is flowing underneath. An effort is made here to divulge the entrenched elements of Vedanta philosophy in the narratives' connive. But before we may ascertain the existence of Vedantic aspects in the novels of R.K. Narayan, it is necessary to explicate what Vedanta is. Vedanta philosophy has its origin in the Vedas. The philosophy dates back to the Upanishads.

There are different schools of this philosophy, which strive to comprehend Brahm, the cause of all; Atman, the self and the relationship between Brahm and Atman. The viewpoint of Advaita, non-dualism is the oldest amongst the schools of Vedanta philosophy. Sankara is the most important educator of Advaita school of Vedanta. In the opinion of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "The term Vedanta literally means the end of the Veda or the doctrines set forth in the closing chapters of the Vedas, which are the Upanishads [...]. The Vedanta sutra is called Brahm sutra because it is an exposition of the doctrine of Brahm, and also Sariraka Sutra, because it deals with the embodiment of the unconditioned self."

KEYWORDS: Vedanta, Brahm, Atman, Self and Realization

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study R.K. Narayan's novels with the purpose of recording traces of Vedanta philosophy in his writings. Though the writer does not bring in these philosophical elements consciously in his writings yet the values of the Vedanta are deeply ingrained in his psyche and keep coming up time and again. R.K. Narayan has flavored his work with Indian religious forms.

The chief protagonists of his novels after leading a materially successful life initially, realize their insufficiencies at some stage and there begins the tilt towards Vedantic values of life. The economic prosperity loses its meaning for them and they realize the importance of leading life based on religious values. It is not important whether these characters are successful or not in realizing their self. What is important is that despite all the irony, the basic values of Vedanta ingrained in the texture of author's mental makeup keep surfacing often enough. But before one can establish the presence of Vedantic elements in the novels of R.K. Narayan, it is essential to explain what Vedanta is. Vedanta Philosophy has its roots in the Vedas. The philosophy dates back to the Upanishads. Sankara is the most important teacher of Advaita school of Vedanta. According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan: "The term Vedanta literally means the end of the Veda or the doctrines set forth in the closing chapters of the Vedas, which are

the Upanishads [...].The Vedanta sutra is called Brahm sutra because it is an exposition of the doctrine of Brahman, and also Sariraka Sutra, because it deals with the embodiment of the unconditioned self.”

The function of Vedanta is profound and divine for all human beings. Vedanta philosophy believes in the eventual oneness of truth. There are different schools of this philosophy, which strive to comprehend Brahman, the cause of all; Atman, the self and the relationship between Brahman and Atman. The viewpoint of Advaita, non-dualism is the oldest amongst the schools of Vedanta philosophy.

He who exists in all beings and who regulates all beings from within them is the only immortal. It is stated in The Bhagwad Gita that spirit is perpetual and the demise is like change of attire. There is no assortment in the actual sense. It is due to our unawareness of the Ultimate Reality that this diversity is apparent. This ignorance is artificial acquaintance or Avidya and the world of array is a chimera or Maya. Dr. Radhakrishnan has described Maya as the name of the separating power, finite theory, which quantifies the incalculable and constructs appearance in the amorphous. This Maya is the feature of the fundamental actuality; neither alike nor unlike the ultimate truth.

Sankara's instance of serpent and rope is well known to reveal the character of manifestation and certainty. This pluralistic creation is a mistake of opinion; the rectification of this miscalculation means the change of opinion. The rope materializes as a snake due to counterfeit comprehension and when the delusion is ended, one is competent to identify the veracity. Sankara does not counteract the creation. He states that when one attains the understanding of exact nature of one's organism, the entire design of cosmos is re-interpreted. The deliverance is to revolutionize the approach of a person towards the world. The ephemeral stuff of the world loses its charisma for the enlightened spirit. The world stays behind and no transformation comes in the world, simply our judgment regarding the world is refurbished.

Vedanta has classified all human purposes broadly into the four Purusarthas. Purusartha means that which is sought after by a human being. *The Gita* has divided these Purusarthas into four categories. These include everything sought after by a human being including sensory satisfaction. These are - dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma is the right action. It is the science of values. It should be given supreme importance. It is the first Purusartha but in actual life kama comes first. Kama is sensory satisfaction and artha is wealth. From an infant to adult, all seek sensory satisfaction. To satisfy these sensory longings, one needs wealth, i.e., artha. All endeavors of human life are directed towards producing wealth (artha) for the satisfaction of sensory desires. According to the Vedanta philosophy, supreme importance should have been given to dharma. When we disturb hierarchy of values the balance of life is disturbed and when one understands the value of dharma, there is new awakening in his soul and he moves a step closer to bliss that is *ananda*. Then life becomes balanced and calm. This calmness of mind makes one eligible to think about moksha, i.e., freedom from all bonds. It is the ideal for which everyone should strive. The first three Purusarthas—dharma, artha and kama all go together.

The Gita contains the essence of Vedanta philosophy. Gita has borrowed very freely from the Upanishads. The word avidya used by Sankara often is not found in the Gita instead we find the word ajnana for ignorance. In The Gita the word 'Brahman' signifies a high state of realization. This realization is coupled with detachment from all worldly attraction. The Gita stresses that every being is a complete and adequate self. The sense of inadequacy arises from the ignorance of the real self. So the knowledge of the self alone can eliminate the sense of inadequacy. There can be many ways to realize the truth. The Gita also advocates the importance of right action and propounds the theory of Karam yoga.

R.K. Narayan has not brought all these Vedantic References consciously in his fiction but we gather his views about his philosophy of life in his non-fictional writings. He has never asserted that he was writing about Vedanta philosophy in his novels on the contrary he denies any spiritual significance of his writings. Also in his essay "Reluctant Guru" he comments about his novel *The Guide*. My novel, *The Guide* was not about saints or pseudo saints of India, but about a particular person. We also find comments about his other novels in his travelogue and his autobiography.

Religion forms an integral part of our Indian way of life as we all perform religious rituals in one form or the other. When the critics refer to Indian way of life they, in fact, point to this urge for Moksha by traversing the path of Sat, Chit and Ananda which is possible by adhering to certain values. The characters of R.K. Narayan's novels are at first satisfied with their material success. They hanker after the material success. But at some point of their life, they feel that they lack the peace of mind. They feel a certain turbulence of mind. At first they act rashly and follow the path of worldly success. They may be common shopkeepers (*Vendor of Sweets*) or rogues like Raju and Margayya but they have a streak of goodness in them. They ultimately realize the value of virtuous life based on religion and morality. The character comes to a turning point in his life where he comes to realize the futility of rat race for money.

At this point in his life a new awareness descends on him. When this new knowledge illuminates the consciousness of the character, a new path in a way reveals itself before him which he tries to explore. He thus tries to synthesize the within and without of his existence. The role of sainthood is forced upon Raju. He fails to know the gravity of the role but still follows it to perfection with a withdrawal and retreat syndrome in between. The Advaita Vedanta believes in certain assumptions. It comprehends the unity of Brahman or God and Atman. The universe becomes the manifestation of maya. The soul forgets its divine nature under the influence of avidya or false knowledge and considers this *namrupa samsara* as real. Then this mortal follows pain, confusion and inadequacy due to this ignorance of true nature. When the light of knowledge lifts the veil of *avidya*, the Samsara which is maya's creation ceases to exist for the soul and the soul and Brahman become one. This is possible only after the annihilation of the self.

Though Narayan's novels cannot be said to portray a completely Vedantic view of life, the urge and effort towards the goal cannot be denied. One cannot deny the presence of the philosophy merely on the ground that the protagonist has not been able to realize his goal fully. The scriptures tell us that devotion to God is a means to liberation. This requires the surrender of self to the will of God. This surrender of self results in divine grace. While actively participating in mundane affairs of life, man's inner self is always at variance with outward activity; it is always in a state of dissatisfaction and is always striving to know the ultimate truth. Ignorance of the real self is the cause of this suffering. Real bliss can be attained only through the knowledge of the self. The evolution of self from ignorance to bliss is a steady process. One has to progress from awareness to awareness point-by-point. Every soul has the inherent potential to work its own way to its divine nature. The novels of R.K. Narayan also delineate this quest of self to eternal bliss.

This may not have resulted in attaining permanent bliss in all his novels but as his novels seem to be the stories of people living in a common locale and a thread of continuity seems to bind them all. The author is rooted in Indian sensibilities, and value system and it is difficult for him to ignore the Vedantic way of life. Though Vedanta philosophy is not apparent and the author does not consciously tilt in favor of a particular school of Vedanta in his novels, the philosophy can be perceived in his novels. To some critics it appears as Gandhian ideals, to others *The Gita's* philosophy, and to still others Hindu metaphysics.

On deeper analysis, we can find subdued, silent, subterranean flow of Vedanta thought underneath. This thought does not pertain to a particular school of Vedanta; it is rather a Vedantic view of life, which emerges when we study *The Gita*, the philosophy of Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and the Upanishads. In the novels of R.K. Narayan also we find the values accepted by the various schools of Vedanta. This philosophy of Indian middle class cultural and social milieu constitutes an Indian view of life and an Indian way of life. R.K. Narayan is considered to be the most Indian of various Indian English writers. His portrayal of life is realistic in physical detail and at the same time, it is suggestive of the depth beneath without being didactic.

Most of his novels are set in a common locale Malgudi, which gives them a unity. Malgudi is a fictional town, typical south Indian town, a mini India with the characters holding typical Indian-beliefs. These beliefs are the Vedantic values, which are ingrained, in our social milieu. There are indications that R.K. Narayan's attitude towards life was greatly influenced by a certain crisis in his personal life. It was the death of his wife whom he had married in defiance of customs and adverse astrological warnings. He did not believe in superstitions. His Western education had given him a practical outlook but the traditional environment at home also influenced him.

His novel *The English Teacher* shows the deep influence of his feelings and philosophy on his writings. When he for both—the author and the protagonist. He was confronted with the mysteries of life and death and his comments in his autobiography about this betray his belief in this regard. The heroes of his novels, *The English Teacher* and *Mr. Sampath*, which he wrote after the death of his wife, progress towards the spiritual poise. His protagonists resort to self-analysis becoming gradually more aware of their shortcomings.

CONCLUSIONS

Narayan's philosophical tilt becomes more evident with the passage of time and this religious temper becomes clearer with his novel *A Tiger for Malgudi*, where he allows salvation even to the tiger. The tiger may be a metaphor of human being or the author may be showing the presence of the same universal self in all creatures. The protagonists of R.K. Narayan's novels are continuously involved in self search. Every appraisal gives them a new insight into the reality of life and self. This summary attempt was to indicate that Vedanta philosophy—in its some facet or the other — does give shape to the final personality of a character here and a character there in his novels.

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